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ABSTRACT

There is a need for a conceptual and methodological approach which can effectively elucidate individuals' experience of problematic transactions with their institutional system, and point to a healing process. The descriptive understanding of the meaning context of the phenomenon of alienation may shed light on the actions of the individual and the processes of coping or resolution. This study, explored personal alienation from one's work institution as experienced by university faculty. Subjects (N=7) were faculty from two public universities, including two non-tenure track assistant professors, three tenure-track assistant professors, and two tenured associate professors. In-depth interviews, totaling about 6 hours, used an open-ended question format. In three cases subjects were observed in university meetings. Interview and observation data were subject to content analysis. Analysis revealed themes of alienation resembling victimization, suggesting a degree of suffering not realized by the subjects themselves. The results suggest that a conceptual and methodological focus on experience has great value in understanding the psychological impact of alienation. Institutional practices and healing interventions which utilize quality of personal experience with the institutional system as the criterion of healthy person-system transactions are needed. (ABL)

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Institutional Alienation: A Phenomenological Analysis

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Institutional Alienation: A Phenomenological Analysis

ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploratory study of personal alientation from one's work institution as experienced by university faculty. Based on phenomenological case analysis of interview and participant observation data, themes were derived and interpreted as dimensions of the experience of institutional alienation.

Themes associated with acute alienation were: (1) loss of ideal, (2) loss of trust and sense of community, (3) negative emotions of hurt, anger, fear, anxiety and disappointment, and (4) personalized blame. During more extended periods of alienation, the themes were: (1) loss of agency and sense of control, (2) limited sense of community, and (3) residual anxiety, anger, and disappointment. Themes which appeared to be related to a movement towards transcendence of the experience of alienation consisted of: (1) revision of perspective from the personalistic to a system's view, (2) revision of assumptions and consolidation of ideals, and (3) reconstitution of community.

Various actions were reported and observed in relation to the

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alienation experience, including: (1) attempt at seeking rationality in the system, (2) withdrawal, (3) continued participation with disqualification of the rationality of the institutional system, (4) grievance against the institution, and (5) separation and termination of membership.

Implications of the findings are discussed, with suggestions for future studies. A conceptual and methodological focus on experience in studying person-institution transactions is urged.

The psychological impact of problems of human systems on its members has been recognized, and interventions sought in connection with institutional healing. There is a need for a conceptual and methodological approach which can effectively elucidate individuals' experience of problematic transactions with their institutional system, and point to a healing process. Interpretive methodology which has been used in field studies of a phenomenological nature offers such a possibility (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Giorgi, 1970). Within a case study format, thematic analysis can be conducted on interview and participant observation data. The descriptive understanding of the meaning context of the phenomenon of alienation may shed light on the actions of the individual and the processes of coping or resolution.

The present paper presents an exploratory study of personal alientation from one's work institution as experienced by university faculty. There are a number of reasons for investigating this population. Institutions of higher education are under considerable pressure due to societal changes and the multiple demands on the professoriate. The stresses in academe have been recognized, with calls for more investment in faculty development. Yet, other than through paper-and-pencil surveys, the experiences of university faculty have been seldom researched.

METHOD

Subjects

Seven faculty from two public university campuses served as informants. There were 4 males and 3 females, aged 26 to 45 years. Two were non-tenure track lecturers, three were tenure track assistant professors, and two, tenured associate professors. These informants were identified through personal contacts and expressed interest in discussing their experience of alienation from the institutional environment. Participation was on a voluntary basis.

Procedures

The main procedure used was in-depth interviews which totalled about six hours on the average. These interviews were spaced over a period of 6 to 9 months. Open-ended questions were used, with non-judgmental listening and a mode of indwelling. In addition, participant observation of the informant's interactions in university meetings was conducted with three cases in two different settings on one campus. The interview and observation data were transcribed and subjected to content analysis. Sample reliability checks were made with the assistance of a peer consultant who also served as a source of balance for the researcher's personal embeddedness throughout the period of study.

RESULTS

Based on the interview and participant observation data, themes were derived and interpreted as dimensions of the experience of institutional alienation. Agreement in the interpretation of themes on the reliability samples ranged from 75% to 90% per case. The themes were further examined in relation to actions reported by the informants during both acute and extended periods of such experience.

hemes associated with what the informants identified as their acute period were: (1) loss of ideals, (2) loss of trust and sense of community, (3) negative emotions of hurt, anger, fear, anxiety and disappointment, and (4) personalized blame. Loss of ideals included feelings of disillusionment with high standards being upheld in university education, collegiality, and fairness. Loss of trust was associated with perceptions of the lack of integrity in the judgments and actions of colleagues and superiors, especially with respect to tenure and promotion decisions being politically or personally motivated rather than based on merit. The described sense of loss of community was reported as isolation from an unresponsive environment or one that is perceived as affectively dysynchronous with the individual's problem

experience. The various negative emotions experienced appeared to be of great intensity, with somatic manifestations in some cases. At least three of the informants reported also negative effects of their experience on their family members. The persons involved described ruminative searches for meaning, and attributions of personalized blame which were equally directed at self and others.

During more extended periods of alienation, the themes were: (1) loss of agency and sense of control, (2) limited sense of community, and (3) residual anxiety, anger, and disappointment. The informants did not feel that they had much control over what they perceived as irrational forces in the system. This sense of loss of agency generalized to varied degrees to different areas of their involvement at the university. The sense of community continued to be limited to a few associates. Residual negative emotions were reported to have lasted as long as two years after the acute experience. In two cases, the informants were no longer at the original setting where they had experienced the problematic transactions, yet the enduring effects were present.

Themes which appeared to be related to a movement towards the transcendence of the experience of alienation consisted of: (1) revision of perspective from the personalistic to a system's view, (2) revision of assumptions and consolidation of ideals, and (3) reconstitution of community. Some of the informants who were

further removed in time from the acute period of alienation described changes in perspective from person blame to a more system oriented view of the problem experiences. Some described a reaffirmation of personal ideals and values in spite of the prior disillusionment. The revision of former assumptions, though painful, was considered part of a growth experience. This concession, however, was made with unqualified indignation over what is still believed to be unjustly caused suffering. The sense of participation appeared to be revived by a reconstitution of community, both psychological and actual.

The actions reported by the informants in relation to the alienation experience varied, and included at different stages: (1) attempt at seeking rationality in the system, (2) withdrawal, (3) continued participation with disqualification of the rationality of the institutional system, (4) grievance against the institution, and (5) separation and termination of membership. It should be noted that the individual's attempts at seeking rationality in the system were reportedly met with non-facilitative responses and further negative labeling. In no case was a satisfactory problem solving context constituted. The resulting reactions took the various modes of withdrawal, self-disqualified participation, militancy, and the more drastic option of termination. The reasons for the personal choices were

not all uncovered, but seemed to be related to the particular circumstances and history of the individuals concerned. Participant observation produced collaborative evidence of the type of actions described in categories (2) and (3). The adaptive value of these actions was more difficult for the observer to ascertain. From the informant's perspective, they were at least congruent with the way they felt.

Regardless of the stage of resolution reported, all informants seemed to have found it helpful to describe their experiences to an interested listener. All informants also indicated that they expected to have to continuously deal with the reported experience, even if their work situation has changed.

DISCUSSION

The identified themes and the character of the described alienation experience rather resemble that of victimization. Fischer and Wertz (1979) depicted the loss of agency and sense of community in the experience of victims of violent crimes. This parallel suggests a degree of suffering perhaps not realized by other than the informants themselves. The additional report of loss of ideals seems to be another key to understanding the particular population drawn to university teaching. Although the observed movements toward transcendence and resolution may point

to a cautious optimism, one is strucked by the tremendous costs incurred in the alienation experiences reported--the personal suffering, the loss of good will, the reduced productive participation, and possibly other less visible costs. It would seem critical that a preventive approach be taken with respect to institutional alienation. The answers would have to include changes in the institutional environment as opposed to a person centered policy of faculty development alone.

The present study suggests that a conceptual and methodological focus on experience has great value in understanding the psychological impact of institutional alienation. Institutional practices and healing interventions which utilize quality of personal experience with the institutional system as the criterion of healthy person-system transactions are urged. Perhaps the near-casualties of alienation could be instructive as far as illuminating the nature of problems and possible coping mechanisms. More faculty input should be sought. This, however, would require a long-term investment in humanistic problem solving and resource development, as well as a valuing of quality experience in process.

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